

**Criminal Records and the Associated Stereotypes:
Views of Freshmen at the University of Michigan**

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Abstract

How do individuals form stereotypes about individuals with criminal records? Do they rely on the news media and incorporate the “if it bleeds, it leads,” understanding of crime in the United States into their perceptions? Do University of Michigan undergraduates hold the dominant and pervasive negative stereotypes about ex-offenders? I interviewed a sample of first-year students from the state of Michigan at the University of Michigan to learn what stereotypes they hold about ex-offenders, but also what influences their stereotypes. I found that my undergraduate sample did not access the news with any regularity. Instead, they rely on personal experiences as well as classroom experience to form their opinions about individuals with criminal records, and these opinions are overwhelmingly sympathetic. The respondents identified many of the inequalities and flaws with the criminal justice system and felt that people who commit a crime deserve to maintain their rights as a citizen of the United States, but also that they deserve a second chance. This ability to empathize with a marginalized group indicates that the current ex-offender population in the United States may not have to face the same level of marginalization that past generations have had to face.

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Introduction

The United States of America currently holds the unenviable position of being the nation that incarcerates the largest portion of its population. It is hard to imagine that the founding fathers had that distinction in mind when they decided to build a nation based on freedom and liberty. Accompanying this unfortunate status is the fact that today an unprecedented percentage of the United States population has a criminal record. At the close of 2008 “federal and state prisons had over 1.6 million inmates (1,610,446) under their jurisdiction” (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2008). A criminal record comes loaded with negative connotations and burdens that people carry with them long after their prison sentences have been served, including disenfranchisement, exclusion from certain professions and in some instances continued monitoring by the state. As the nation faces a huge increase in ex-offenders re-entering society it is important to address the treatment of an under-represented but growing percentage of our population. Ex-offenders no longer make up a negligible percentage of our population. According to the United States Department of Justice, “in 2008, over 7.3 million people were on probation, in jail or prison, or on parole,” which amounts to 1 in every 31 adults (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2008) [*See Figure 1*]. As this marginalized group continues to grow, it becomes part of the general population’s responsibility to assist their re-entry into society.

Even through my small sample, exploring the difficulties that ex-offenders face and the stereotypes associated with a criminal record will help in multiple ways predict the future of ex-offenders. Not only will it allow individuals to address the stereotypes that they hold, but it can also help better prepare ex-offenders for some of the difficulties that they will encounter as they return to the general population. This is an issue of importance for the entire nation, enough so that it found its way into George W. Bush’s 2004 State of the Union Address: “America is the

land of the second chance, and when the gates of the prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life” (Reported in CNN 2004).

Theoretical and Empirical Questions

After leaving prison ex-offenders are marked with a label that will follow them for the rest of their lives. They face a multitude of obstacles: legal sanctions barring them from certain professions, the loss of certain rights (including disenfranchisement in certain states), and a lack of recent work experience and work history.

How do students at the University of Michigan interpret a prison record? What stereotypes do undergraduates at the University of Michigan hold about people with criminal records? Does the extremely bright, educated, and presumably liberal University of Michigan population hold traditional stereotypes about people with criminal records? Have they internalized information about sentencing disparities, the war on drugs, three-strikes-laws, and structural inequalities? What do they believe should be the long-term effect of committing a crime, and where do they get their information about the long-term effects? The University of Michigan is well known as a center of liberal thinking. Walking around on an average day during the 2008 Presidential election campaign, an observer would have been assailed by pro-Obama paraphernalia and signs supporting Michigan’s two liberal ballot initiatives, just as during the 1960’s the Ann Arbor campus was a center for radical movements. Accompanying this reputation for liberal thinking is the expectation that there is an open-minded student body.

This research addresses the ex-offender population, one of the groups in society that rarely gets the benefit of such open minds. The United States has seen a four-fold increase in its incarceration rate since the mid-1970s (Raphael 2009), and American citizens have been

incarcerated at higher rates despite decreases in crime [See Figure 2]. Focusing on the University of Michigan undergraduate population, and more specifically incoming freshmen from Detroit and Michigan's suburbs, I will examine the stereotypes that this group of students holds and identify what sources have influenced these stereotypes. Will the subjects have adopted the stereotypes put forth by the mainstream media that surrounds them, or will they have incorporated different information into the images that they hold?

Public Opinion

To capture all the facets of this problem it is important to examine multiple areas of existing research. In "Why Are U.S. Incarceration Rates So High?" Michael Tonry (1999) proposes multiple explanations for the high incarceration rates in the U.S. He illustrates the cyclical nature of incarceration rates as well as public opinions about crime. When looking at opinions about crime, it is helpful to understand how these opinions are formed. Tonry explains the roles that crime rates, public opinion, and politics play in the general perception of crime and incarceration in the United States. An understanding of the historical processes that have played a role in perceptions about a criminal record are useful to understand the potential contributions that society at large may make to how subjects perceive a criminal record.

Tonry clearly illustrates that perceptions of crime in the United States are produced by societal forces, and as such are subject to change. Tonry specifically attributes society's perceptions and interpretations of crime to "American moralism" and the "structural characteristics of American government" (Tonry 1999:419). He proposes that the shaping forces at work in society are higher crime rates, public opinion, partisan politics, political fragmentation, and historical cycles (Tonry 1999). Tonry's conclusions have a special resonance in my University of Michigan sample because the student's interviewed do seem to have

absorbed the views of the society around them, especially the perceptions of their parents, classmates, and teachers.

The changes in incarceration in the United States might lead some people to believe that Americans wholeheartedly support increasingly punitive policies. However, Cullen et al.'s (1990) "Public Support for Correctional Treatment: The Tenacity of Rehabilitative Ideology" suggests otherwise. This research indicates that the public still supports rehabilitation as a primary goal of the criminal justice system. The public's faith in the success of rehabilitation varies with the type of crime. In spite of the shifts towards harsher, longer and more strict sentencing the "public continues to believe that offenders should not only be punished but also rehabilitated" (Cullen et al. 1990). Subjects favor programs that "equip inmates with enough skills to make conformity a realistic option" (Cullen et al. 1990). However, people support prisoners returning and becoming functional members of society *in theory*. These same subjects may not even be aware that they harbor stereotypes that make it difficult for ex-offenders to re-enter society *in reality*. Community support is an essential part of reducing recidivism. This article indicates promising public support for successful reintegration; perhaps it is prisons that are failing offenders by not preparing them to re-enter society as productive members. This view of re-entry as the goal of incarceration was reinforced by my subjects during their interviews. Every subject thought that once an ex-offender's debt had been paid, they should return to society unencumbered by stigma.

Applegate et al. (1996) assessed public opinions about criminal justice policy by examining how support for three-strikes laws varied depending on the way that the questions were asked. A "three-strikes law" generally means that if an individual is convicted of a third felony he or she will automatically receive a harsh punishment, such as 25 years to life in prison.

While these laws exist in many different forms across the nation, they are all based on this common framework. In “Assessing Public Support for Three-Strikes-and-You’re-Out Laws: Global versus Specific Attitudes” Applegate et al. (1996) challenge politicians’ claims that increasingly punitive policies are what ‘the people’ want. When the researchers first asked subjects if they generally supported three-strikes laws, they found overwhelming support. Then they asked subjects about specific scenarios using vignettes and asked subjects what an appropriate punishment would be. Only 16.9% of the respondents chose the punishments that would be allotted under a three-strikes law, and only 4.7% of the sample said that no extenuating circumstances should be taken into account (Applegate et al. 1996). This study reveals that the public supports punitive policies in the abstract, but very few people support their blanket harshness in practice. The public may not endorse the more punitive direction that the criminal justice system has taken, contrary to what policy makers would like us to think. Again, the subjects in my sample were aware of the need to help ex-offenders move on with their lives by providing them with the resources to do so.

Stigma, Stereotypes, and Negative Outcomes

In “Conceptualizing Stigma,” Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan (2001) define stigma, and the role that it plays in today’s society. The authors stress the importance of having a uniform operational definition of stigma. The definition they propose contains multiple components that involve the many ways that stigma functions in society. This is relevant to my study in two ways and their conclusions were reflected in the attitudes of those people that I interviewed. First, they provide an excellent working definition of stigma. They define stigma as the “co-occurrence of its components – labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination- and further indicate that for stigmatization to occur power must be exercised” (Link and Phelan

2001). Second, they explain the important effects that stigmatization can have on life chances especially in the areas of “earnings, housing, criminal involvement, health and life itself” (Link & Phelan 2001). Their article emphasizes the need for information about the stereotypes about ex-offenders because it so clearly illustrates the negative effects of stigmatizing such a large portion of our population. Additionally, by providing a complete working definition of stigma, the authors have provided a template for categorizing interview responses that will help code them in a cohesive manner. A shortcoming in the article is that the examples that the authors use to illustrate their points are limited to biological traits: race, gender, and mental illness. Some people, including a majority of the subjects in my sample, would argue that crime is a choice, unlike the examples the authors use. This article also highlights the necessity for a standard definition of a stereotype. The understanding that a stereotype is a preconceived image held in a person’s head about a specific type of person or group of people is the definition used in this paper. The best formal definition that conveys the same understanding is: “an oversimplified set of beliefs about the members of a social group of social stratum that is used to categorize individuals of that group” and that demeans them (Andersen and Taylor 2005). This definition does not necessitate that stereotypes be negative, but I expected to find that the stereotypes associated with a criminal record would be overwhelmingly negative.

“Race, Class, and the Perception of Criminal Injustice in America” by John Hagan and Celesta Albonetti focuses heavily on conflict theory and its applications for criminological research (1982). The article examines the question: Do race and class affect people’s perceptions of injustice? The authors found that both race and class play a large role in people’s perceptions of injustice. Their study indicates that black Americans are more likely than white Americans to perceive injustice in their encounters with the criminal justice system, but also that

as an individual's class position increases their perception of injustice lessens (Hagan and Albonetti 1982). If people's perceptions about the prevalence of injustice in society have an impact on what they think about the criminal justice system and its effectiveness, those opinions will also have an effect on how people perceive a criminal record. For example, if people believe that the criminal justice system fairly metes out justice, then they will most likely believe that the negative effects of a criminal record are deserved, whereas a person who perceives injustice in the system is more likely to believe that the stigma associated with a criminal record is not necessarily deserved. The fact that these perceptions are tied to race and class locations increases the impact of these differing perceptions of a criminal record since crime and incarceration disparately impact different racial and socioeconomic groups. In my sample the subjects who had the most direct relationship with crime, had the strongest reaction to the injustice of the system.

Devah Pager (2003) conducted an excellent research experiment to determine the effect a criminal record has on the job outcomes of white and black males. One of the most interesting aspects of her article, "The Mark of a Criminal Record," is how adept she is at framing the problem of mass incarceration so that the reader focuses on the problem, not the negative stereotypes. She ensures that everyone can relate to the magnitude of the problems facing prisoners re-entering society, which is useful for anyone attempting to write about a marginalized group. Additionally, her results reveal important truths about the way that society views a prison record. A key revelation is the important role that racial stereotypes play in the way people interpret a criminal record: "Americans hold strong and persistent negative stereotypes about blacks, with one of the most readily invoked contemporary stereotypes relating to perceptions of violent and criminal dispositions" (Pager 2003). The study found that white males with a

criminal record are more likely to receive a call back for a job than black males without a criminal record. Pager's finding that a criminal record increases the stigma for black males more so than for white males is important for my research and indicates an important trend that did appear in my interview responses. It also clearly illustrates that stereotypes about criminals and racial stereotypes are linked.

John Hurwitz and Mark Peffley discuss racial stereotypes in "Public Perceptions of Race and Crime: The Role of Racial Stereotypes" (1997). Hurwitz and Peffley examine the multiple linkages between race and crime and the reasons why these linkages exist. Using "plentiful evidence that racial attitudes (including stereotypes) impact policy attitudes on other ostensibly 'race-neutral' issues such as welfare," as well as the overrepresentation of African Americans in official crime statistics, on news coverage, and in racially coded political messages, they look at how these factors reaffirmed and reinforced existing stereotypes (Hurwitz and Peffley 1997). The researchers found there was a relationship between white people's attitudes towards crime policy and their stereotypes of African-Americans, especially in cases where the crime was aligned with the stereotype of a black violent criminal. Stereotypes are activated more strongly when the case is consistent with a preconceived image, for example if a person already has a pre-existing criminal record. Hurwitz and Peffley found that people with pre-existing racial stereotypes were more supportive of harsh policies. This study further highlights the conflation of racial and criminal stereotypes. The racially charged nature of crime creates a potential confounding factor for isolating the stereotypes held specifically about a criminal record without associated racial stereotypes.

"Why Whites Favor Spending More Money to Fight Crime: The Role of Racial Prejudice" by Steven E. Barkan and Steven F. Cohn (2005) further addresses the role that racial

stereotypes play in policy decisions. The increasingly punitive nature of the criminal justice system in the United States is a factor in the increased incarceration rate and has emerged in response to the public's perceived concerns about crime. Their research showed that "fear of criminal victimization is not a consistent predictor of support for harsher sanctions," but prejudice against African-Americans is linked to support for more punitive policies (Barkan and Cohn 2005). Barkan and Cohn's findings are similar to other research showing that racially prejudiced whites are more likely to support punitive policies and increased spending to fight crime (Barkan and Cohn 2005, Hurwitz and Peffley 1997). These studies raise important questions about criminal justice policy in the United States.

Fear and the Media

The news presents crime and criminals in a specific way replete with biases and specific agendas. When Americans rely on the news for their knowledge of crime they devour the information along with the biases that accompany it. In "Crime, News and Fear of Crime: Toward an Identification of Audience Effects," Chiricos et al. (1997) examine fear of crime and news consumption. The researchers found that news consumption is related to fear of crime for specific groups, especially for groups that are less likely to have direct contact with crime. The authors state that for white women specifically "TVNEWS serves as an instrument of social control," by teaching them to be afraid (Chiricos et al. 1997). It is possible that the news could also play a key role in perpetuating the negative stereotypes associated with a criminal record, by focusing only on career criminals and people who fail to reform after their release. As such, the news media may be acting as an instrument of social control that reinforces and perpetuates existing stereotypes about ex-offenders in the same way it creates fear for white women.

“Breaking News: How local TV news and real-world conditions affect fear of crime,” examines the effects that different types of news media have on an individual’s fear of crime (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004). The authors suggest multiple theories to explain the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime; their purpose was to determine whether real life conditions impact how fearful people are of crime depicted on the news. Weitzer and Kubrin’s study examined several types of media outlets and incorporated real life demographic conditions into their research. In addition they looked at two different aspects of consumption, both frequency and saliency (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004:350). Instead of simply examining where individuals got their information from, they also determined the source of information that had the largest impact on an individual’s perceptions. Their findings revealed that individuals who use local television news as their main news source were more fearful than people who relied predominantly on other sources (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004:360). The authors’ research supported the hypothesis that media presentation of stories that are reflective of real life experiences reinforces the fear that already exists for individuals who encounter crime, because the stories resonate with them (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004:347).

Finally, Boulahanis and Hultsley examined how an overrepresentation of atypical crimes in the news can skew people’s perceptions of the real situation (2004). The study “Perceived Fear: The Reporting Patterns of Juvenile Homicide in Chicago Newspapers” was designed to examine whether the public was accurately informed about the reality of juvenile homicide in their area (Boulahanis and Heltsley 2004). Statistics indicate that “although the total number of homicides involving juvenile offenders has declined in a relatively linear fashion since 1994, the number of cases receiving newspaper coverage mostly increased during the same time period” (Boulahanis and Heltsley 2004:295). Researchers found that the younger the victim or the

offender the more likely the story would be covered by the newspaper. This skewed newspaper coverage could explain the continued misperceptions of the number of juvenile homicides. The researchers found that “the race of the respondent proved to be the best predictor of fear, with African American respondents reporting a higher level of fear than Caucasian participants” (Boulahanis and Heltsley 2004:304). These findings seem to indicate further support for Weitzer and Kubrin’s study, especially considering the fact that individuals “residing in areas that had moderately high juvenile homicide rates” increased the likelihood that respondents reported fear (Boulahanis and Heltsley 2004:304).

In *News: The Politics of Illusion*, W. Lance Bennett (1983) analyzes the way in which the news is constructed in order to have the maximum impact, which is to focus on little attention-grabbing details and sacrifice the larger picture and significance of stories. Bennett believes that in order to “escape the news prison, people must develop some independent, analytical perspective with which to interpret the news” (Bennett 1983:99). I believe that this is what the University of Michigan or any other type of sophisticated educational setting does. It educates individuals and allows them to assess the news in a detached and analytical way, instead of simply accepting it as fact.

The existing research in the area of criminal justice policy has clustered around the role of racial stereotyping and its effects on policy decisions and stereotypes associated with a criminal record (Barkan and Cohn 2005, Pager 2003, Hurwitz and Peffley 1997). Additionally, the research that has been done on media effects has tended to focus on fear levels, rather than stereotypes (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004, Boulahanis and Heltsley 2004, Chiricos et al. 1997). The effect of racial stereotypes on perceptions of crime raises some important questions. The criminal justice system in the United States has changed drastically in the last three decades. If

the stereotypes associated with a criminal record have not also changed, could it be because they are not really representative of people's perceptions of criminals? The conflation between racial stereotypes and crime suggests that perhaps prejudice against a "criminal" is an acceptable way to express what might in reality be racial prejudice. Research in the area of policies has shown that the public does not want blanket harsh punishment. They still have faith in rehabilitation and trust in the courtroom workgroup's discretion to with apply an appropriate sentence (Applegate et al. 1996; Cullen et al. 1990). The above articles provide an excellent framework for understanding what my research will mean and might add to a body of knowledge, as well as highlighting potential pitfalls and confounding factors that might arise during my research. The existing research cited above sets the stage for my research by analyzing the mechanisms at work that affect incarceration, stigma, and perceptions of the justice system.

Significance

There are many factors outside of an individual's control that contribute to his or her chances of committing a crime. As a society we do not do enough to prevent the factors that contribute to crime, and then we continue to punish offenders after they have completed their sentences. There are reasons that stereotypes about people who have served time in prison exist, but that does not make the stereotypes fair or right. Society has determined that those convicted of crimes must be punished; however, once our justice system determines their punishment and their sentences have been served, their debt to society is supposed to have been paid. The fact that society continues to punish people long after they have completed their allotted sentence is neither fair nor just.

In recent decades, the United States has seen a huge increase in the rate at which we incarcerate our population. Midyear 2008 approximately 2.3 million people were being held in

state prisons, federal prisons, or local jails (Bureau of Justices Statistics 2008). In addition, “at midyear 2008, there were 4,777 black male inmates held in state and federal prisons and local jails per 100,000 black males in the general population, compared to 1,760 Hispanic male inmates per 100,000 Hispanic males and 727 white male inmates per 100,000 white males” (Bureau of Justices Statistics 2008). The huge number of Americans incarcerated every year is not the only issue. We are also incarcerating certain racial groups in numbers that are not representative of their percentage in the population [*See Figure 3*]. As a result, a criminal record is no longer something that only occurs in a very small portion of the population, and it affects certain segments of the population disproportionately. Most of the people that are incarcerated do not die while they are incarcerated; they are released back into society. As the portion of our population with a criminal record increases, it becomes important to see how society responds to these ex-offenders. Lack of community support and the inability to find employment have major effects on the rate of recidivism; stereotypes impact both of these factors. Understanding the stereotypes that undergraduates associate with a criminal record will provide important insight into how the youngest generation of adult Americans will deal with the large number of ex-offenders in the population and can also have major impacts on policy decisions. Given the current economic crisis the status of ex-offenders in our society could become even more marginalized. As people that are seen as ‘good honest Americans’ lose their jobs, it will be even more difficult for ex-offenders to find legal gainful employment, especially as prisons continue to fail to provide them with adequate skills to survive post-incarceration. These problems are exacerbated every time the media highlights a particular instance of an ex-offender re-offending, reinforcing negative stereotypes. The way the media affects perceptions and stereotypes can either minimize or increase the marginalization of the ex-offender population.

Hypothesis

I initially hypothesized that the stereotypes held by first year undergraduates would align closely with the stereotypes that are dominant in mainstream American culture and would be extremely negative. The media would reinforce their stereotypes, and this reinforcement would ensure that the negative stereotypes associated with a criminal record now affect a much larger portion of the population. I also hypothesized that media coverage of the extremely public and punitive policies as well as of sensationalized cases would emerge in the subjects' perceptions and stereotypes of crime and criminal records, although this might not be possible to determine given my resources. Finally, I expect to find some type of racial undertones or linkages associated with the criminal stereotypes reported by the subjects. Alternatively, the subjects could be affected by influences other than the mainstream media, for example, popular culture, personal experience, or classroom experience. If this is the case, I expected to find a much wider range of stereotypes that include some less negative perceptions. If the subjects are relying on classroom knowledge to inform their opinions, it will be interesting to note where their classroom experiences took place: either at the University of Michigan or prior to their arrival. If they occurred at the University of Michigan, it will support the perception of the University as a liberalizing educational center.

Methods

The purpose of this paper is to examine the beliefs and stereotypes held by a group of first year undergraduate students at the University of Michigan and to determine what sources influence these stereotypes and the subject's perceptions of people with criminal records. Throughout the interview process certain themes arose continually. Three themes, demographic differences, a focus on second chances, and personal experiences with the criminal justice system, are central to my analysis and this thesis.

Research Design

This project is based on qualitative research. It involves a series of 15 semi-structured interviews completed between October 22, 2009 and December 3, 2009. These interviews were designed to discern people's impressions, feelings, and ideas about criminal stereotypes and to gain an understanding of how the individuals obtain, incorporate, and form their own stereotypes. The use of a semi-structured format was invaluable because it allowed me to rearrange the questions based on comfort levels observed in the participants as well as to allow the conversations to flow naturally. It also allowed me to learn certain facts from every participant, for example, whether they have any connection to an ex-offender, whether they have any background that involves crime, what geographic region they grew up in, and what knowledge they have of the criminal justice system (See Questionnaire in Appendix B). The goal of the interviews was to determine what stereotypes the subjects held about individuals with criminal records. I believe that guiding the subjects to certain pertinent issues and allowing them to freely discuss their opinions was the best way to gain their confidence and glean the most information. Learning about their backgrounds and associations with the criminal justice system provided insight into their knowledge of the criminal justice system, as well as potential explanations for the stereotypes they held. These conversations each evolved in their own unique way, as participants understood, responded to, and framed their answers differently depending on their own personal experiences. The result is a group of diverse interviews that all provide a wide variety of ideas and impressions about not only what it means to be a "criminal" in the United States, but also different ideas about the role crime plays in daily life.

Recruitment

The original method I wanted to use for recruitment, drawing on first year students from the University of Michigan's Summer Bridge program, was not feasible. The process set forth by the Director of the Bridge Program was too burdensome considering the time frame and available resources for this research. As a result, an alternative technique for recruiting participants had to be selected. The change in recruitment technique benefited the project. The new recruitment tactic resulted in a different sample overall for the research, while still incorporating several students from the Summer Bridge Program.

The new strategy for recruitment resulted in participants being recruited through two distinct techniques. The first technique was recruitment through enrollment in classes. Since the population of interest was first year students from Michigan at the University of Michigan, I began my recruitment in first-year seminars, which are small classes designed for and restricted to first year students. First-year seminars are taught by faculty members in their particular areas of expertise and the small class size allows first year students the opportunity to interact with one another and the professor in an academic setting. Not all freshmen take a seminar, so the students enrolled in these seminars are already a self-selected group. I approached all of the professors that instruct first year seminars through e-mail, resulting in visits to seven classes. When I attended classes I explained the purpose of my research and asked for participants. During my first two days of classroom visits I provided the students with my e-mail address and asked them to contact me if they were interested in participating. This technique was not achieving any response, so I changed my strategy. From that point on I passed around a notebook and asked interested students to provide me with their e-mail addresses and then I

contacted them immediately after class. This improved the response rate significantly, and I was able to recruit eight participants through this method.

When the first year seminar pool was exhausted I tapped into another pool of freshmen through the Greek Life Community on campus. I attended a new member meeting at one of the sororities on campus and gave the same presentation that I had been giving in the seminars. This recruiting technique was a success, and I recruited seven women, a population that had been absent from my sample since I had only male volunteers from the seminars.

The sample used in this project is not representative of the population. The participants for this study were drawn from a select group, and then were set apart further by the nature of their participation. The 15 person sample that these recruitment techniques returned was adequate for my purposes and my sample size is still sufficiently large to be meaningful. African Americans, Caucasians, and Asians are all represented in my sample, which is divided between eight men and seven women. The hometowns of the participants are more heavily concentrated in the suburbs than I would have preferred, but the interviews with the two individuals from Detroit were extremely valuable and yielded a lot of information. I hoped to recruit some Hispanic participants, and so I reached out to an Introduction to Latino/a Studies class. Unfortunately, no students were interested in participating, and time constraints prevented me from further pursuing this avenue. This sample is not appropriate for a study that requires a representative sample, however, my study has benefited greatly from the wide variety of subjects that it included. My sample provided me with a group of students from a wide range of backgrounds: urban, suburban, and rural, as well as a variety of socioeconomic classes and interests scholastic and extracurricular. The benefits of the sample that I collected heavily outweigh the potential negatives; by drawing my sample comes from a large variety of

socioeconomic positions, hometowns, and personal experiences. Their disparate backgrounds and their location at the start of their college careers means that I was able to collect 15 distinctive and interesting points of view on the issues before their experiences at the University of Michigan are fully underway. My goal was to learn what information young adults draw on to inform their stereotypes about criminals; in this instance it is more valuable to have a diverse sample than a representative one.

Interviews

The interviews were all set up through e-mail exchanges and took place at three locations: Amer's in the Michigan Union, the atrium of the Shapiro Undergraduate library, and the living room of the Alpha Chi Omega sorority. In choosing locations for the interviews I wanted to find a balance between public and private, while also taking into account the needs of the subjects. I wanted to ensure the comfort of the participants; however, I also wanted certain privacy so that subjects would not be intimidated or overwhelmed by the environment. These three locations were well-suited to that objective because they provided a public setting but were also equipped with privacy, attributable either to being set off from other patrons or background noise and activity that allowed our conversations to be conducted unheard and uninterrupted.

The interviews lasted from between nine and 30 minutes. The participant controlled the time spent on the interviews; I had a series of questions that we were able to go through; however, the length and depth of responses was up to the participants. Using a semi-structured interview allowed me to ask follow-up questions and delve into topics that were of interest. It also allowed me to rearrange the questions to follow the flow of the conversation and to gain additional insight if certain areas were more salient for the subject.

The survey instrument was designed with the goal of collecting a range of experiences during the interview, as well as to ensure that certain information was standardized across all of the interviews. Across the board the interviews began with demographic questions to ensure that baseline information was collected from every individual in order to determine the characteristics of the sample. The rest of the interview was divided into three topics.

The first topic concerned the subject's news consumption. The interview was intended to assess not only how the participants access news, but also how their parents access news. Looking at the news consumption habits of the parents allowed me to see what type of background the participants came from as far as involvement with the news was concerned. A topic that repeatedly came up during my earliest interviews was the Department of Public Safety e-mails sent out to students through the University of Michigan e-mail system. This led me to include these e-mails in my interview questions, since they were clearly a prevalent source of information for students at the University. Many of the students chose to frame or connect their answers back to material that they had encountered in a class, so I decided to ask participants what classes they were currently taking.

The second topic dealt with the subject's personal experiences with crime and the criminal justice system. These questions spanned a range of involvement: association with criminals, experience as victims, safety concerns, as well as interactions with the various branches of the criminal justice system. These questions were the ones that I most frequently rearranged since some of them dealt with sensitive issues. Better responses were elicited when they were blended into the natural flow of conversation.

The final topic consisted of a few questions about some popular topics in criminal justice research, and about the subjects' substantive knowledge about the criminal justice system. These questions were included in order to determine how much factual knowledge the students had about crime of the type that would be gained from a class at the University. These questions were always placed at the end of the interview because it provided an excellent way to conclude the interview. This final series of questions allowed the subjects to synthesize the information that they had been discussing throughout the interview, and for some participants they served as reminders of last minute ideas that they wanted to share.

Sample

The sample collected for this research is not a representative sample, but it was also not intended to be representative of the population at large or the University of Michigan population. As a result this research represents an examination of a very specific group of students. The participants are first year students from the state of Michigan who live either in a city or the suburbs. Additionally, the students are drawn from two smaller populations within the University of Michigan community. Not all freshmen are enrolled in first year seminars, but about 80% do. Additionally, some of the seminars have very specific topics that overlap with the focus of this research, so some of the participants may be individuals who were already interested in the issues of crime in the United States. The second sub-group is the participants recruited from Greek Life. Members of the Greek community at the University of Michigan tend to be more predominantly White, out-of-state and from higher socioeconomic brackets. The participants were all volunteers who were offered no compensation; this means that individuals who participated in this research did so because of an interest that they had in the topic, a self-selected group of the population with interesting ideas that they wanted to share. While these

circumstances could be problematic in an attempt to recruit a representative sample, that problem does not arise in this research. The design of this research project was not intended to recruit a representative sample; it was intended to recruit participants with a range of experiences and knowledge about the criminal justice system and its participants. What this study indicates is the wide variety of perceptions about crime and criminals present in this age group, which are drawn from a wide range of sources. This study gives insight into how young upwardly mobile members of society make sense of issues such as harsh criminal penalties and the long-term effects of a criminal record. It is my conclusion that the more contact that young people have with the criminal justice system, the more they understand the somewhat random and capricious way in which it operates, and the more they sense its fundamental unfairness. During the course of the study, I began to realize what a special and illustrative study group this was. At the beginning of adulthood, my subjects' views of crime and criminals were being re-examined and then being replaced by alternative ideas based on their new experiences: living alone for the first time in a new environment, being exposed to an intellectual academic setting, and for most of them, living in a new city. It would be a worthwhile extension of this research to examine how these subjects' responses have changed after a second year in college or after graduation and a transition to a different environment. The wide variety of hometowns, backgrounds, majors, and interests of my subjects means that my sample is full of different points of view and approaches to understanding the role of crime in society. Every one of my subjects comes from a distinct social location, and this variety means that their input when combined provides me with a much fuller and more complete picture of how young men and women are actually conceptualizing crime and their opinions of ex-offenders.

After transcribing the interviews, I read them to identify simple data as well as common themes that arose across the interviews. I coded the straightforward data numerically in a spreadsheet, for example, personal news consumption, parental news consumption, and personal experience with the criminal justice system. The themes that arose throughout the interviews included the ways in which individuals conceptualize crime, the factors to which they attribute crime, as well as their resources for knowledge about crime. Many students admitted to having no interaction with news, while other some students relied heavily on it, and some other students framed all of their discussions around information that they had encountered in classes. A preliminary finding was that the subjects' perceptions of criminals and crime do not come from the news as I had originally hypothesized, but instead come predominantly from other sources, primarily classroom experiences, personal experiences and communication with their parents.

Inclusion of the DPS alerts in the interview questions added another source of information for students. Every subject told me that they had read at least one of the e-mail alerts sent out from the Department of Public Safety, while a majority of the subjects told me that they read them regularly. Reviewing the DPS alerts allowed me to analyze a source of information that is relevant and applicable for all of the subjects that I interviewed and also added another dimension that I was not aware existed when I originally conceptualized my project.

Results

As the project progressed it became readily apparent that sources and influences other than the news were contributing to the subject's stereotypes, and those other sources might be even more important. Among these were the individual's classes at the University of Michigan as well as their personal experiences with law enforcement, crime and the justice system at all

levels. It also became clear that in less than one full semester at the University of Michigan, the subjects had begun to internalize the messages that they were learning in their classes and applying them to their analysis of situations. This is an interesting and encouraging sign of the potential of a college education to improve the way that individuals conceptualize problems, even in as little as two to four months. Another factor that I failed to anticipate prior to the interviews was that students' most salient information about crime in their community comes from the Department of Public Safety. The University of Michigan Department of Public Safety issues e-mail alerts to the entire university community when there is a crime that they deem particularly alarming, threatening or dangerous. This information supports my alternative hypothesis that subjects will inform their thoughts on crime and criminals based primarily on their first-hand interactions with the criminal justice system. My subjects also relied on information provided by authorities, including parents, professors, and classroom materials. My surveys also indicated the value of a liberal arts education in expanding individuals' minds and thought processes.

The interviews yielded a lot of information about how the subjects conceptualize crime and their thoughts about criminals. While there were certain themes that arose more frequently than others, there were many general themes worth mentioning. Many of the respondents expressed the need to give individuals a second chance. A majority of the respondents mentioned some variation on this theme by attributing the criminal act to a mistake, expressing an expectation that people can change, or by pointing out that after completing their sentences, ex-offenders deserve a fresh start.

Another point of interest was the subjects' reluctance to discuss race. The respondents frequently skirted around racial stereotypes while at the same time being very open in discussing

socioeconomic factors. The only two individuals who openly discussed the role of race in perceptions of crime were the two African American male subjects. While even they did not want to discuss race in-depth, Sean explained: “I don’t want to get into race because when it does come to criminals a lot of the time I do think that people are thinking of my race.” I suspect that many of the respondents were using low economic status as a way to indicate racial stereotypes in a way that was more comfortable for them. Lisa’s succinct explanation of the causes of crime is representative of the general tone of responses in the sample: “I think being in poor areas and having a lower education are important.” The subjects overwhelmingly framed their perceptions of criminals and their beliefs about what causes crime is economic, attributing crime to an impoverished neighborhood or family. Interestingly, a number of male subjects also brought up the necessity of turning to crime in order to “make it” and “survive,” Tom exemplified this when he discussed one specific instance that he encountered in class: “these aren’t evil people. They are going out there trying to feed themselves and help their families.” While the women identify with the emotional aspects with caregivers and nurturers.

Some of the respondents who had first-hand experience with the criminal laws acknowledged they received preferential treatment. By contrast, if they did not receive preferential treatment they were frustrated and offended by the way they were treated. Trevor expressed his frustrations with an encounter he had while attempting to complete a Breathalyzer test in Chicago:

“[I]t was very shocking because I wasn’t used to like, you know, I’m used being treated... like I go to college, I get good grades, I’m used to being treated with this respect and people treating me really nicely, and all of a sudden I was like the criminal.”

Even though he needed to take a breathalyzer test because he had received a Minor in Possession of Alcohol ticket and was on probation, he did not believe that he should be treated as if he were a criminal by the Chicago police. Trevor's experience also made him more understanding towards other individuals interacting with the police.

“I think that definitely that experience made me realize how punitive the whole system is. If I were in a situation where I were encountering police officers with that power dynamic often it would definitely discourage me, definitely make me frustrated with the system, definitely like encourage me to continue to act out, continue to break laws.”

This frustration with the criminal justice system and a belief that it is not functioning as effectively or fairly as it could be was repeated throughout multiple interviews. Individuals who had encounters with the criminal justice system that worked out in their favor often felt that they had received breaks that were not particularly fair, even though everything worked out to their benefit in the end. When discussing how she avoided receiving a ticket following a traffic accident Jen described her views of the criminal justice system: “Well I would say that it was quite, I mean to be completely honest corrupt.” Even though she was happy with the outcome, she knew that it was not fair.

Two-thirds of the respondents believed that individuals who had committed a crime, but served their punishment should be allowed to vote. These individuals framed their answers in terms of their rights as citizens of the United States, with some respondents going into detailed explanations as to how these rights are an essential feature of our nation. Only three respondents reported any regular consumption of the news, which clearly indicates that they are not forming their perceptions based on information learned from that outlet. Additionally, very few respondents reported that their parents followed the news in any meaningful or regular way. However, the individuals whose parents were regular news consumers reported that they read the

newspaper, watched television, or listened to the radio, whichever their preferred method was, every single day. Approximately half of the participants reported some type of personal experience with the criminal justice system, while only three respondents reported knowing an individual who had been incarcerated. Overwhelmingly the respondents felt safe in Ann Arbor even though all of the respondents had also read the DPS alerts that informed them of crime in the area.

Department of Public Safety Alerts

Crime alerts are e-mail alerts issued by the University of Michigan Department of Public Safety. They are issued when a crime is committed on campus or around campus and it is decided that for their safety the University of Michigan population should be informed. The alerts are issued in a number of different formats including fliers, on the Department of Public Safety website and to all University of Michigan e-mail accounts. This paper addresses only the e-mail alerts; however, the content of the alerts is the same in all of the formats, the only differences is the method of delivery. During the Fall 2009 semester the Department of Public Safety issued a total of five crime alerts. One alert was issued when an unknown male groped a female in the Michigan Union, two alerts were issued for unarmed robberies, one alert was issued when a female awoke to find an unknown male sitting in her bedroom, and the final alert was issued for an armed robbery when the suspect entered an apartment with a shotgun and demanded valuables. In each instance the suspect was a black male. These alerts are important because they are the only source of news that all of the subjects have in common. A majority of the subjects read the DPS alerts regularly, but every respondent had read at least one of the alerts.

Throughout the interviews these e-mail alerts came up regularly and every respondent had an opinion about them. Several individuals expressed surprise and concern about the types of crimes being committed around campus. Nick recalled: “the one where that girl woke up with a guy in her room, that one took me off guard.” Sean, who spent the summer in Ann Arbor, was surprised by the types of crimes that took place during his first months on campus, “who robs people who are just riding their bikes or jogging?” Several more respondents felt more comfortable being informed about the crimes going on around campus. Tom compared the alerts to a “safety-net. It’s nice to know that there is someone out there looking out for situations.” Frequently respondents remembered certain details accurately while incorrectly remembering the overall reason for the alert. Ray recalled: “I think most of them are very minor. I read one about some guy popping out the window.” Ray is recalling the incident where the girl awoke to find an unknown male in her bedroom; however, he is not remembering it correctly. Additionally, he recalls the majority of the alerts as being minor leaving out the armed robbery and the sexual assault. Jen recalled receiving an alert for a stabbing outside of her dormitory as well as the alert about the fondling in the Union. She remembered the alert about the Union correctly but no alerts were issued during the Fall semester because of a stabbing. She incorporates the alerts with some other source of information. Only one respondent, Sean, commented on the race of the suspects in the alerts, “It’s irritating to me because it’s the same description a lot of the times but then again I understand because it’s always us, it’s always black males, all the time.” Sean not only reads the alerts, he discussed them several more times during his interview, but he takes in more than just the crimes being committed. He noticed that the descriptions of the suspects are always very similar. While the respondents had a variety of responses, levels of interest, and amounts of attention paid to the alerts, each respondent had at least one thing to say about them.

Discussion of Findings

The interviews yielded more information than can reasonably be covered in a paper of this size; however, there were certain themes that arose across a majority of the interviews. The recurring themes will be discussed below. They fall into three distinct categories: demographic differences and concerns; focus on a second chance; and citizen's rights and variations in personal accounts and experiences. These three themes were consistent throughout all of the interviews. At least two of these themes appeared in every interview, and some interviews had aspects that fell under all three. These themes provide information about the ways in which young adults form stereotypes about crime, ex-offenders, and criminals, as well as what factors are the most important to them while they are forming them.

The respondent's familiarity with criminal activity had a strong effect on the way that they viewed criminals and the effect that incarceration has on them. For example, Sean, an African American male who grew up in a rough section of Detroit said about criminals:

“people do it [commit crimes] because people know that it is what we do. That is what we are, Black males, they rob a lot and commit a lot of crime so I guess they feel like they need to follow the stereotype of us. I guess they feel like it's not that bad to just do it...I guess they just feel like it's all unaffordable. But I'm not really surprised by them at all.”

As a result, his view of ex-offenders was colored by his direct knowledge of crime: “most of the time when I think of a criminal even if they do have a criminal record they still do the same things, because that's what they have to do. They don't have any alternative way to make a living.” Sean's perceptions of criminals are tied directly to his experiences in his neighborhood and his own perceptions of the accuracy of the stereotypes held about African American males in society and their likelihood of committing a crime. Sean sees crime as a result of following what society expects of you and not trying to fight back against the overwhelming perception that

black males are criminals. It follows from his view of crime at large that he sees ex-offenders in a similar light. He believes that even if an individual has been punished, served time, or some other form of public acknowledgement of criminal activity they will still continue to commit crimes, because they do not have any other options. For Sean, the expectations of society tell individuals that it is ok to commit an initial crime and then the lack of opportunities to make a good life for oneself following a criminal conviction push ex-offenders to continue to commit crimes. His ability to acknowledge these patterns is also a way of rejecting them as the pattern for his life and shows the insight that can be gained with the transfer to a new community.

The contrast with Sean's personal connection with crime was found in Sally's views. Sally grew up in a wealthy suburb of Detroit, she had no personal connection with crime; all of her information came from her parents, her background, newspapers, crime shows, and DPS alerts. Her perceptions of ex-offenders were quite different from Sean's. Sally sees the criminal justice system as: "very orderly and fair. There's a lot of rule and order and you have to go about it a certain way. There is not a lot of deviation or anything like that." Sally believes in the impartiality of the legal system and she believes that it treats every individual who is processed through it in the same manner. Sally does not have an understanding of the structures in place that push people towards crime or the structures that protect certain people from feeling the full weight of the law. In her view individuals commit crimes, receive their due punishment, and move on with life, a naïve view born of her lack of experience with any form of crime or criminal activity other than her mother's sunglasses being stolen out of her car and that lack of experience influenced her views.

Demographic Differences

The hometown of a subject and the subject's gender were two factors that clearly affected the responses that I received from the subjects. The interviews with female respondents were quite distinct from the male interviews. Additionally, the hometown of the respondent factored heavily into their responses forming three distinct groups: individuals from Ann Arbor, individuals from the suburbs and individuals from the city. These two factors affected the interviews in different ways. The influence that gender had on the subjects' responses was much more subtle than the impact of a subject's geographic background.

Gender

The interviews with female subjects were all conducted after I had completed all of my interviews with the young men. I had difficulty recruiting female participants and eventually turned to the University of Michigan Greek System. All of the female subjects came from a Pan-Hellenic sorority on campus. The female subjects on average had interviews that lasted five minutes less than the male interviews. Surprisingly the young women were more likely to say that they felt safe on campus; in fact none of them reported ever feeling unsafe on campus. I think this sense of safety comes from the fact that many of the women take for granted the precautions they already take. For example many of them mentioned carrying a can of mace on their keychain and almost all of them mentioned walking in groups. These are precautions that are built in as part of being a young female, so they don't feel any less safe in Ann Arbor than they would anywhere else. Additionally, young sorority women are well known for traveling in large groups. Most sorority houses on campus require meeting at central locations and traveling as one large group or and strongly encourage traveling to and from their dormitories in groups, providing an automatic sense of comfort for sorority women. They also seemed less comfortable

talking about the subject matter and much more frequently said things such as “I don’t know anything about that” or “I’ve never learned that” or “I haven’t taken a class about that.” As a result, I found myself being more positive and encouraging with the young women, reassuring them that I was interested in their opinions and thoughts more than factual knowledge. This suggests that many of the male subjects may have also felt this way but were more hesitant to admit that they did not have knowledge of the subject matter.

The most notable difference among the young women was how often they connected crime to the offender’s emotional state. When prompted to discuss the causes and contributing factors of crime, only two young women did not mention emotional state as a main contributing factor whereas only one young man indicated that emotional state might play a role in criminal behavior. Elizabeth stated her point of view: “they’re angry about something and they quickly react and do something without thinking about it.” Sally had similar thoughts about the causes of crime: “Maybe jealousy might cause people to commit crimes, or maybe revenge.” Another subject, Elaine, highlighted the mental aspects of a crime: “I think there also has to be some type of psychological thing involved in it too. I think that you can be so down that you might do something.” All of these women, and more in my sample, used a person’s emotional state to explain why they would commit a crime, and they all did so explicitly.

Location: Inner City; Suburbs; Ann Arbor

Inner City

Three clear categories emerged when participants discussed their hometowns. The respondents in this sample are all permanent residents of the state of Michigan and with one exception all the respondents have lived in Michigan their entire lives. Nonetheless, Michigan is a large state and the respondents come from a wide range of hometowns. The two individuals

from Detroit had their own unique views of crime that were heavily informed by their experiences in their hometown, experiences which are not limited to Detroit; and could be expanded to other depressed cities. The two subjects from Detroit were both African American males, and both respondents discussed their neighborhoods with a little reticence. However, once they began talking both men mentioned how little time they spend outside of their homes. One respondent, Sean, explained that his mother encouraged him to engage in activities that did not take him outside of the house: “My neighborhood, it was filled with bad people but I stayed in the house a lot because my mom and dad always told me ‘don’t talk to them’.” Nick, the other Detroit respondent, discussed a similar set of circumstances: “From personal experience I know that it’s just how it is, the neighborhood that I was in as a kid, that’s pretty much what I was exposed to, criminals.” Both men were aware of the negative aspects of their neighborhoods, but they also had families that encouraged them to avoid those negative aspects.

Another aspect that made Nick’s and Sean’s interviews stand out was their awareness of the crimes in Ann Arbor. While all of the respondents had read the DPS alerts and were aware of the occurrence of crimes in Ann Arbor, only Nick and Sean expressed concern about the criminal activity in Ann Arbor. Nick talked about discussing the DPS alerts with some of his hall mates in his dorm and his surprise when, “they were like- No, there’s no crime happening in Ann Arbor and I was like ya’ll don’t read the e-mails.” Nick and Sean were in Ann Arbor over the summer and they both mentioned how surprised they were at the large number of DPS alerts sent out during that time period. Nick stressed: “When I filled out the application to come here I didn’t really think that this was a high crime city, but I was here over the summer too and there were several of the crime alerts.” Both Sean and Nick were much more aware of the crimes taking place in Ann Arbor, but this knowledge did not impact their feelings of safety. They both

reported feeling extremely safe in Ann Arbor; they were both better informed about crime than the rest of the sample.

Suburbs

The large majority of the respondents can be grouped together in typical suburban settings, and they all tended to have similar opinions when it came to the geographic influence on their perceptions of crime. The respondents from the suburban settings often mentioned feeling safe in their hometowns in contrast to Nick and Sean. They expressed these feelings directly and also subtly; Jen pointed out: “I have friends that leave their doors unlocked when they go on vacation for a week and a half, that’s just the type of town I live in.” Will talked about transporting his feelings of safety and trust from his home environment to Ann Arbor with him; “on my hall I’ll leave my room to go to the bathroom and I’ll leave the door unlocked because we all trust each other, that’s how I’ve always been.” He has never had to worry about trusting the people around him, so it is easy for him to leave his door unlocked and believe that his belongings will be safe. Some individuals were more blunt about their experiences growing up; David emphasized that: “there is not so much crime in Brighton, a little petty crime maybe.” Elizabeth tied her feelings of safety at home directly to her feelings of safety in Ann Arbor; “I feel very safe [at the University of Michigan] and I feel very safe in my home community.” One thing that all of the suburban respondents had in common was that they had grown up in areas where they did not worry about crime, and they carried that attitude with them to Ann Arbor. It similarly affected their views of ex-offenders and their beliefs that individuals deserve a chance to improve their lives after they have completed their punishments.

Ann Arbor

The last group was one that I was not expecting to stand out so strongly, and it consisted of the two respondents from Ann Arbor. Both these individuals believed that by growing up so close to the place where they attend college, they were missing out on a larger point of view, and they qualified their opinions because of this. Tom spent a large amount of time in his interview discussing his concerns about missing out,

“I don’t think I have as wide a perspective as some out of state students do. I think other people have another center of their universe but for me it’s all kind of the same thing. It’s a disadvantage that I don’t have the second horizon that other people do.”

Whereas Tom had a more over-arching feeling of being closed off from the larger world.

The other Ann Arbor subject’s feelings on the subject appeared in his interview in

smaller ways. For example when asked about available resources for ex-offenders,

Trevor said “I don’t know a lot, I can only talk about Ann Arbor, that’s what I know.”

Both men expressed the some frustration with their “limited” view; both seemed to feel set apart from the other students because their only experiences have been in Ann Arbor.

These two clearly wanted more experience. Their conclusions about ex-offenders were equally limited; not having much experience neither of them wanted to generalize.

The way that the subjects’ attitudes were affected by their hometowns provided some interesting insight into the role that environment plays in the formation of opinions.

The only direct question about hometown in the interview came at the beginning, and the

rest of the questions were more open-ended. The fact that so many respondents chose to

incorporate information about their hometowns indicates that they still rely heavily on

their experiences to inform their opinions, in spite of the fact that they are living

somewhere else now.

Citizenship and Second Chances

The subjects in my sample frequently discussed citizenship and the opportunity for a second chance in their interviews. In fact only one participant did not mention citizenship or second chances. The regularity of these themes within the interviews is telling. The subjects revert to these topics when discussing why they believe that people with criminal records deserve the opportunity to blend back into society. This response is different from the one that I had been expecting; the subjects in my sample were more open-minded than I had been anticipating.

Many respondents combined the idea of a second-chance and citizenship together in their responses to my question about voting rights for individuals convicted of a felony. Fully 13 participants believed that ex-offenders should be able to vote, although some of them placed caveats on this view. For example, some felt that voting rights should not be returned until sentences were completed or after they had “re-earned” the right in some way. Nonetheless, a majority of the respondents felt that committing a crime did not negate your rights as a citizen of the United States of America. I think it is telling that respondents placed so much emphasis on the preservation of rights; many respondents combined their opinions about second chances with a discussion of citizenship.

A major factor in this narrative is how strongly the idea that citizenship and its associated rights are ingrained in us as citizens. Our nation is built on a shared belief that these rights are essential and inalienable. This belief is so deeply ingrained that individuals cannot justify denying these rights to anyone. Obviously this understanding is based on the assumption that an individual with the criminal record is already an American citizen: 86.6% of my sample believed that ex-felons deserved to maintain the rights associated with citizenship in the United States,

without any qualifications or caveats on this belief. Thirteen individuals framed their defense of voting rights as something necessitated by citizenship; which is an interesting way to express the need to give ex-offenders a second chance.

A majority of the participants saw crime as something that can accidentally occur instead of a deliberate choice. Many respondents qualified the potential criminal act as a “mistake,” and clearly believe that rehabilitation is the point of incarceration. As Jen put it:

“No, they’re still people and they’re still Americans and their opinions still matter. I mean just because you’ve committed a crime does not necessarily mean that you’re not a changed person I mean they could really regret what they did.”

Another time when second chances were frequently brought up was when subjects were discussing jobs. Will noted: “I think that if I were in jail and I got out I’d see it as a fresh start but not a lot of employers see it like that,” the respondents are very aware of the difficulties facing people after they are released from prison. I found this interesting because it is in-line with the tendency of the respondents to interpret the criminal justice system as ineffective. Many respondents mentioned the extremely punitive nature of the criminal justice system, the way that it favors people with money, and the necessity of “knowing” someone who can assist you. This understanding of the criminal justice system is demonstrated in their opinions of second chances. The respondents know that there are very real barriers that individuals have to face after leaving prison, furthermore they understand that the continuation of punishment after their sentences have been completed is not in-line with the ideals of the criminal justice system and they are expressing this when they urge the necessity of a second chance. Their belief in second chances is expressed only in theory in the interviews, it would be interesting to determine how effectively these individuals put these theoretical views into practical use, but that is beyond the scope of this project. A key factor related to the subject’s understandings of the criminal justice system is

where these interpretations come from, why do they feel this way? For many of the respondents these interpretations come from their own personal experiences, either with the criminal justice system or through interacting with classroom or pop culture materials.

Personal Experience

The individuals who participated in this study had a wide range of interest in, prior knowledge of, and experience with the subject matter. As a result their responses covered a range of information and there was a large amount of variety in their responses. The respondents largely associated their information and feelings with different aspects of their lives. Some individuals had experience with the criminal justice system (either as a victim or an offender); others had family members who had experience with the criminal justice system, others relied on their media exposure; and some people used their classroom experiences. All of these different sources led to different understandings and feelings about the criminal justice system and what it means to be a “criminal.”

The individuals who referred back to their classroom learning to frame or help explain their understandings and feelings about the criminal justice system all highlighted the inequalities and flaws within the system. They were learning about racism within the system, the disadvantages of extreme poverty, and the discrepancies between punishments for white-collar crimes and violent crimes. The subjects were very aware of the flaws in the system and in society at large, and they understood how these biases affect individuals with criminal records. One respondent, Ginny, had a very unique experience with the criminal justice system in high school. Her community had a diversionary court program where young adults could be sentenced by a group of high school students instead of in a traditional court setting. Ginny and

her classmates enrolled in a class and spent part of their time learning about the criminal justice system and the rest of the time serving as a jury for actual misdemeanor cases presided over by a judge in a court room in their high school. Ginny enjoyed the experience but also had some doubts about the impartiality of the system, “I still think its weird that we were allowed to do that and sentence them it just seems shady. Like if we said they had to pay a fine the had to, and its like what do I know about the law?” The ability to influence courtroom proceedings did not coincide with Ginny’s understanding of how the criminal justice system functioned. She was not entirely comfortable with the situation. Ray’s experience with a Sociology class cemented his views on living with a criminal record in the United States,

“I’ve felt this way for quite a while, but after taking Sociology here, I feel that with a criminal record its very difficult, even close to impossible to live a good lifestyle in America. I think that before it was more of a broad thought and now I’m more able to pinpoint the problems in our justice system.”

Ray’s classes at the University have allowed his thoughts to coalesce and provided him with the knowledge and information to support beliefs that he may not have been able to articulate before. This is an example of the benefits of higher education, especially in light of how quickly it has had an effect on his thoughts, only two months into his college education.

Veronica discussed learning about crime and inequalities in the system in her English class: “after reading this book I think it’s unfair and it has to do with how much you know or how much you’re gonna tell the judge and I think people get screwed over sometimes.” Students at the University of Michigan are learning about crime and the criminal justice system in a multitude of different ways and through a variety of disciplines. The respondents who mentioned they had taken classes where this material

was discussed all mentioned negative aspects of the criminal justice system. Students are learning about the failings of the system, and this awareness is allowing them to be more sympathetic than they might otherwise be.

Individuals who relied on personal experiences with the criminal justice system, either their own experiences or a family member's, fell into two categories: victims and offenders. Nick discussed the difficulties his cousin faced following a sentence for car theft: "it was very hard for him to get back into the work place, they had no trust at all, he was given no benefit of the doubt." Nick also discussed a friend with similar difficulties, "one of my friends he went to juve [Juvenile detention center], then he was let out and he couldn't find employment; he had a hard time getting back into school; he just wound up back in jail." Many respondents indicated that they were aware that for some individuals, the barriers facing them and their attempts to re-enter society make it almost impossible for them to lead a law-abiding life. Very few people that I interviewed discussed involvement as an offender; however, the two that did, revealed some very interesting thoughts. Two subjects discussed their "offenses" both of which were minor, but still involved court appearances, and for one individual, the criminal offense resulted in probation. Jen discussed a traffic accident, which she readily admitted was her fault. She was scheduled for a court appearance to assess her level of responsibility for the accident, but instead a family friend intervened and spoke to the judge on her behalf before her court date. As Jen told it:

"Well, I would say that it was quite, I mean to be completely honest, corrupt. I mean it worked out in my favor. I got out of like \$120 in tickets and points on my license because someone knew someone. And like I mean I was happy but it probably shouldn't work out like that. I caused two accidents I should have gotten a ticket."

She was very aware that she received special treatment, and although she is glad that she avoided punishment she knew that it is an unfair way for an “impartial” system to operate. Trevor, who interacted with the system as an offender, had two very different experiences with the criminal justice system. He received a ticket for being a minor in possession of alcohol and was placed on probation with the understanding that his record would be cleared if he successfully completed probation. When discussing his probation officer he explains the experience as a very positive one, “[S]he was very understanding to the fact that like I wasn’t a problem drinker, that I wasn’t like a problem.” Trevor’s probation officer treated him in the way he was used to being treated: as a white suburban male attending a prestigious university. He had a completely different experience in Chicago when he had to check in for a Breathalyzer test as part of his probation,

“[I]t was very shocking because like I wasn’t used to, you know, I’m used to being treated, with like respect and people treating me really nicely, and all of a sudden I was like the criminal almost and like making assumptions about what I was like... gonna start a fight or something... it was wild.”

He was very uncomfortable with the way he was treated by the Chicago Police Department. As he was recounting his experiences, he became agitated and had trouble expressing himself. The assumption by the Chicago Police that he was a criminal and that he would be causing a future problem left him very upset and agitated. They viewed him in a way that was inconsistent with his own self-image and identity, and it made him frustrated and angry. He was able to apply his experiences to the imagined experiences of other individuals who were encountering police officers with an unequal power dynamic. He was very understanding and compassionate towards the difficult and demeaning position that he imagined individuals with criminal records to be in *every time* they encounter the police. I did not expect to find this ability to identify the inequities within the system or the ability to empathize with individuals involved in the system.

It illustrates the importance of personal experiences in the formation of stereotypes and perceptions.

Conclusion

When I began this research I anticipated that during my interviews I would find the traditional negative stereotypes about individuals with criminal records. I also expected that the students I talked to would use news stories to explain their perceptions of crime and criminals, but what I found was very different. The subjects used many different sources to explain and justify their opinions about crime and ex-offenders; however, almost no one used the news to explain their thoughts and instead respondents relied on real life experiences and classroom material. Rather than use the news to inform their perceptions students relied on other sources. Some influences were life long and deeply engrained; hometowns, neighborhoods and environments very much influenced individuals' perceptions of safety while there were very clear gender differences when discussing the causes of crime.

Vincent Yzerbyt and Andrea Carnaghi (2008) have done numerous studies on the role of stereotypes and how they can be most effectively challenged and changed. It is their conclusion, that people are largely influenced by data that comes from within their social group ("in group data"), rather than by information that comes from outside of the group that they belong to ("out-group") (Yzerbyt and Carnaghi 2008). My study reinforces this view; my subjects were much more influenced by information that came from their social group and surroundings before they entered the University of Michigan community, and showed real evidence of incorporating views of their new community into their understanding of crime and criminals as evidenced by their reliance on what they were learning and their generalizations from the DPS alerts. Additionally, they have learned that changing stereotypes requires a change in the individual's perceptions of

in-group norms (Yzerbyt and Caraghi 2008). People will disregard views that are different from those of the group to which they belong, this finding is reinforced by the views of my study subjects; several of them showed changes in their views of crime and criminals which reflected their new "in-group" sources, the University community. Veronica best exemplified this process:

“I’m actually reading about this book for English, it’s about how sometimes people who have committed really violent crimes were set free so that they could put drug dealers in jail. Sometimes I think it’s unfair and it has to do with how much you know or how much you’re gonna tell the judge and I think people get screwed over sometimes.”

Several others indicated that they were beginning to reject the views of other groups they were moving away from, such as their prior geographic community and their families. Tom discussed his new found appreciation for the world news: “Since I’ve been here [The University of Michigan] and taken history classes I’ve realized that we’re not the only ones on the planet. There’s a million things going on and it seems like it’s important not to lose sight of things going on in other places.” Veronica, Tom, and many of the other respondents discussed the new information that they had access to since coming to the University of Michigan. Their views of the world, of society, and of the specific criminal stereotypes that we were discussing were based in their personal experiences both past and present. However, their changing views were influenced by their new sources of information, in the forms of classroom time and new peers, and these sources were encouraging them to look at these situations in ways that they had not before, as Yzerbyt and Carnaghi’s (2008) research indicates their stereotypes are changing along with the changing views of their in-group.

The most notable finding was that the respondents were much more sympathetic and willing to give individuals the benefit of the doubt than I had anticipated. Almost the entire sample discussed the importance of ensuring the rights of ex-offenders, and a large majority of respondents discussed the importance of giving them not only a second chance, but also the opportunity to build a better life for themselves. This ability to empathize with the situation was largely influenced by the respondent's own personal experiences, as well as their classroom materials. Many of the subjects were able to identify flaws within the criminal justice system either as a result of a class they were taking at school or based on a personal experience. This ability to identify that the system is not completely impartial and that not everyone receives a fair chance allowed them to be much more sympathetic to the situation of ex-offenders.

The one source of information that all of the respondents had in common are the University-issued Department of Public Safety crime alerts. Although these are only sent if it is decided that there is a threat to campus safety, these alerts did not impact respondents' feelings of security on campus. The ability of individuals to learn to empathize even if they did not have personal experience with the criminal justice system indicates that education can change stereotypes about ex-offenders. It does raise the question of whether it is a generational difference that allows these respondents to be more empathetic than the adult population. It may also be true that as well as a well-known liberal institution, the University of Michigan attracts students who are more open-minded about the situation in which marginalized groups find themselves. The results of this research show much promise for future expansion and its ability to positively change the societal stereotypes about ex-offenders. The subjects of this research are a unique group of individuals. Young adults from a wide range of backgrounds who are beginning their time at a prestigious four-year university, they are very much the future of

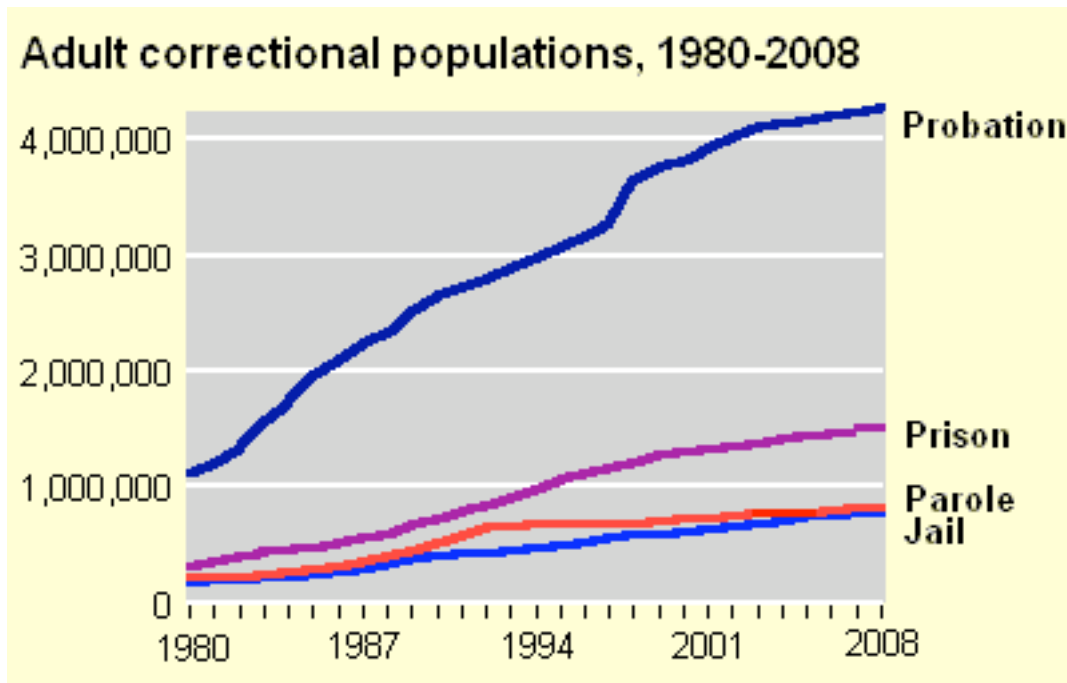
America. Their ability to incorporate the information that they have begun to learn has already had a significant impact on their perceptions of ex-offenders and the way that the criminal justice system operates. The open-mindedness and willingness to incorporate new information shows an ability to change preconceived notions which is essential in order to combat existing stereotypes of marginalized groups, especially the ex-offender population.

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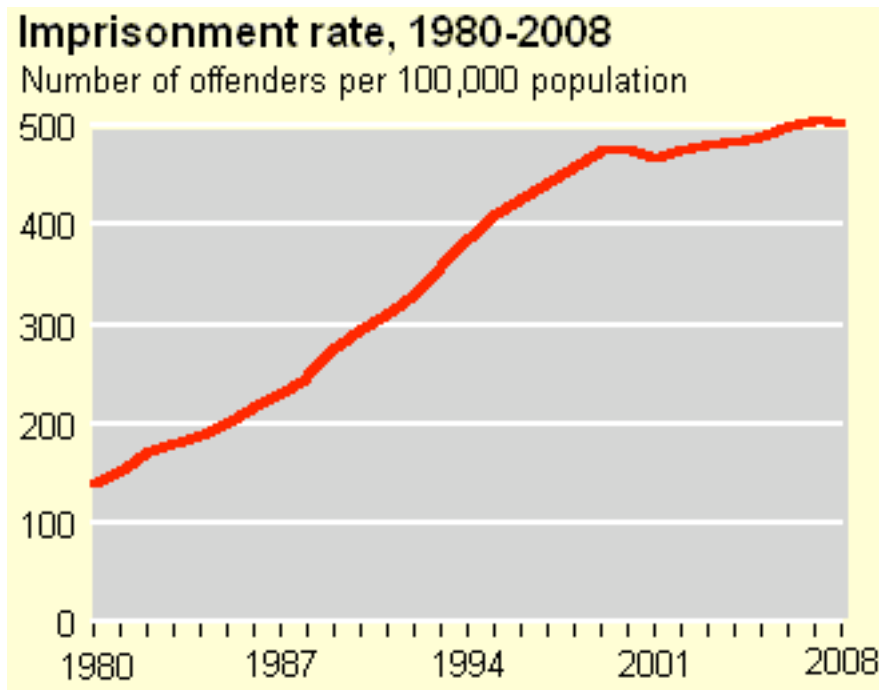
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Figure 1



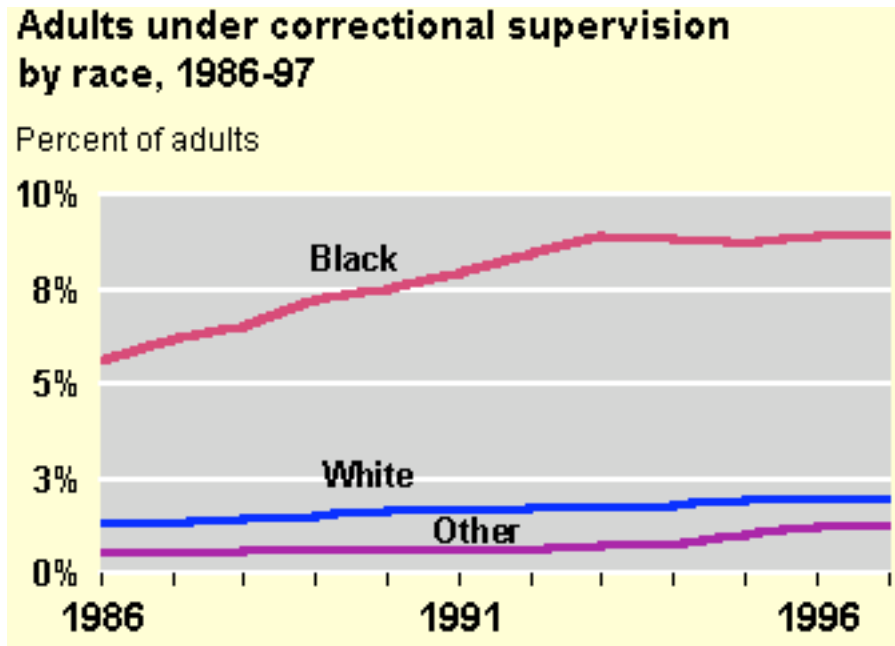
Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics 2008

Figure 2



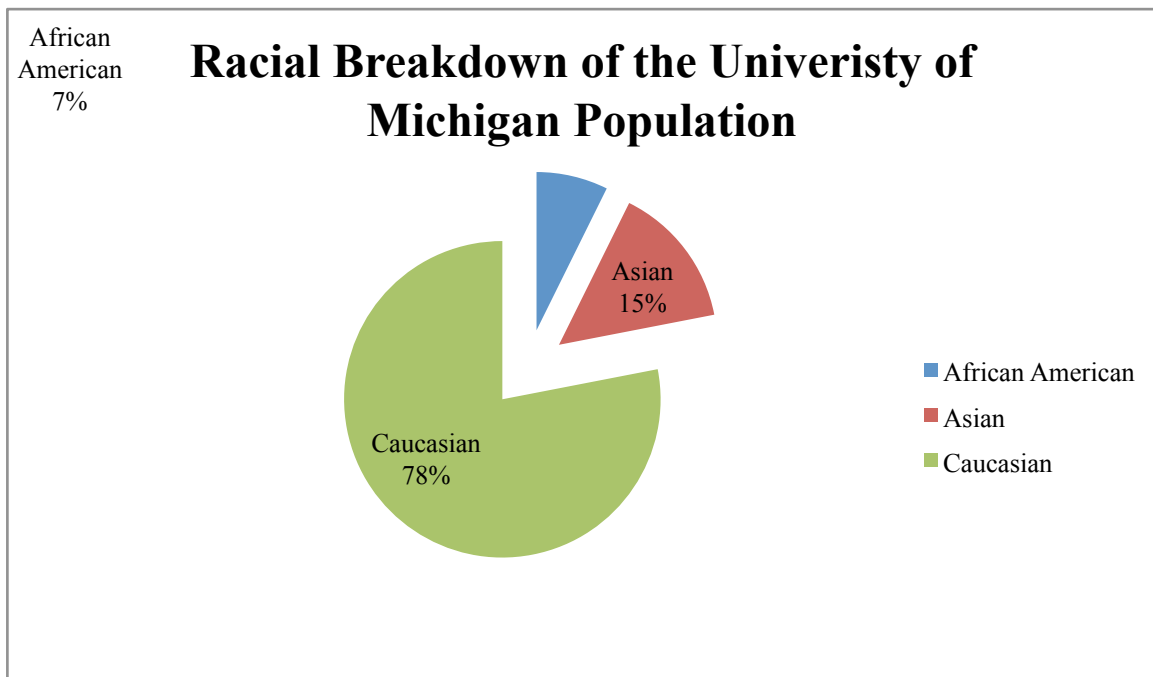
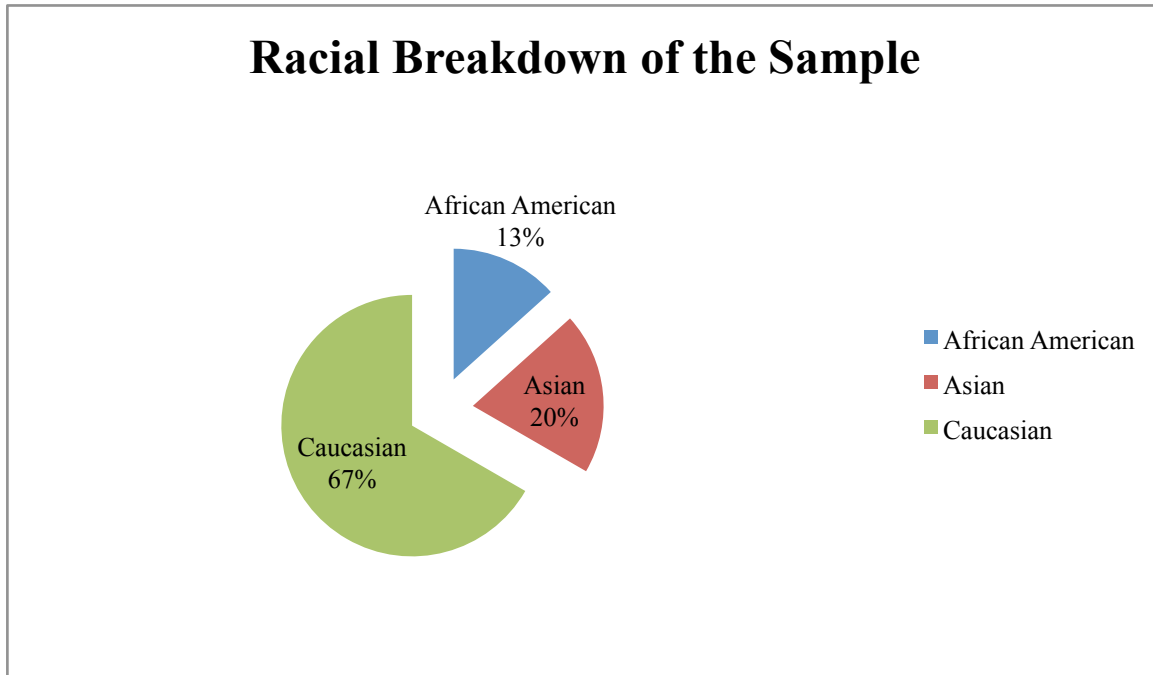
Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics 2008

Figure 3



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics 2008

Figure 4



Appendix A

Consent form for Criminal Records and the Associated Stereotypes

My name is Anne Collins, and I am an undergraduate Sociology major at the University of Michigan. I am conducting interviews on undergraduate students' perceptions of a criminal record.

I ask that you read this document and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. This study is part of my Sociology Undergraduate Honors Thesis. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and involves participation in research. In addition to being completely voluntary you can decline to respond to any question and you are free to withdraw from the study at any point in time.

This study aims to understand how undergraduate's perceptions of criminal stereotypes compare to the stereotypes presented by the media. It has the potential to help understand how stereotypes are formed and what can be done to prevent stereotypes from further damaging and already disadvantaged group of people. The risk to participants is extremely low. In this interview I will ask you a series of questions about criminal stereotypes and discuss topics including your background, previous exposure to crime, perceptions of the criminal justice system, and your exposure to news sources. The interview will be 30 minutes long; with your permission the interview will be tape recorded to preserve that accuracy of your comments. If you do not want your interview to be recorded you are still welcome to participate in the study. Participation in this study is limited to individuals 18 or older; please inform me if you do not qualify.

Your information will be kept completely confidential. No identifying information will be recorded. All interview forms and materials will be kept in a secure locked location and on a password protected computer. The information collected from the interviews will retained indefinitely for recordkeeping purposes, but will not contain any identifying information. Should you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in research, please contact the Institutional Review Board, Behavioral Sciences, 540 E. Liberty #202, Ann Arbor, MI 48104, (734) 936-0933, email: irbhsbs@umich.edu

If you have further questions, you can contact me at: annejc@umich.edu

Should you have questions about the study please contact my supervising faculty member:

Professor Alford Young Jr.

Associate Professor

Department of Sociology

Email: ayoun@umich.edu

I agree to participate in this study.

Signature

I give permission for this interview to be tape-recorded.

Date

Signature

Date

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Criminal Records and the Associated Stereotypes

1. Where are you from?
2. What year are you in school?
3. What racial group(s) do you identify with?
4. Do you know anyone who has ever been incarcerated?
 - a. If so for what?
 - b. Do you know of any barriers that they have faced because of their incarceration?
5. Do your parents subscribe to a newspaper or a national magazine?
 - a. If so which ones?
6. Do your parents regularly watch the news?
 - a. If so which channels?
7. How do you access the news? What is your main source of news?
 - a. How often do you access that source?
8. If the internet or newspaper: what types of stories do you tend to focus on/read
9. Do you watch crime shows (i.e. C.S.I., Law and Order)?
 - a. How realistic do you think those TV shows are?
10. What are some of the words that pop in to your head when you hear the word “criminal”?
11. Do you and your parents ever discuss crime?
12. Do you have any particular safety concerns?
13. What would you consider a “criminal record”?
14. What do you think the most common crimes in the United States are?
15. Where do you think there are environments that create crime?
16. What do you think causes crime?
17. Have you or anyone you know ever been a victim of a crime?
 - a. If yes, please elaborate.

18. How effective do you think the criminal justice system is at effectively punishing people?
 - a. Police
 - b. Judges
 - c. Prosecutors
 - d. Juries
19. Do you know any statistics about the prison population in the United States?
20. Are you aware of any resources for ex-offenders in your community?
21. Do you think those released from prison who have committed a felony should lose their right to vote?
22. Do you think society's treatment of juvenile offenders is successful?

Appendix C: E-mail Script

Dear Professor xyz,

I am a senior at the University writing my honors thesis in Sociology. My thesis is about the effects the news media on undergraduate students' perceptions about criminals and the ways that the media influences stereotypes. My thesis will be based on interviews. Ideally my sample will be composed of Caucasian and African American first year students from the metro Detroit area attending the University. I am writing to request access to the students in your First Year Seminar after discussion with my advisers. The students in these seminars are an ideal population from which to draw my sample. Would you be willing to allow me to come and briefly speak with the students in your seminar? Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. Thank you in advance for your consideration,

Anne Collins

Anne Jackson Collins

University of Michigan 2010

Sociology BA

Alpha Chi Omega - Theta Chapter

Appendix D: Recruitment E-mail

Hello,

I am writing you because you gave me your name during Professor xyz's class. As I mentioned I am researching the impact that the news has on people's perceptions of criminals. My focus is on first year students from Michigan. My research consists of a brief interview that will be set up at a convenient time and location for you. If you are interested in participating or if you have any questions please respond. Thank you very much and I look forward to talking to you.

-Anne

Anne Jackson Collins
University of Michigan 2010
Sociology BA
Alpha Chi Omega - Theta Chapter

Appendix E: Codebook

ID	Identification number for the interview
Loc	Location: City/Hometown of the subject
Race	0- Caucasian 1- African American 2- Asian
Sex	0- Male 1- Female
NEWSS	News- Self: - Does the individual consume news on a regular basis (self-definition) 0- No 1- Yes
NEWSP	News-Parents: – Do the individual’s parents consume news on a regular basis (self-definition) 0- No 1- Yes
CIT	Citizenship: Do the subjects mention citizenship in relation to ex-felons rights? 0- No 1- Yes
Safe	Do they feel safe in Ann Arbor? 0- No 1- Yes
PerExp	Personal Experience: does the subject have some kind of first hand experience with crime? 0- No 1- Yes
Class	Do they mention something that they learned/read in class? 0- No 1- Yes
DPS	Does the subject read the DPS alerts? 0- No

	1- Yes
Cause	What does the subject believe is the cause of crime? 0- SES 1- Family 2- Environment 3- Emotion 4- Drugs
Chance	Does the subject believe that individuals deserve a second chance? 0- No 1- Yes
INC	Does the individual know someone who has been incarcerated? 0- No 1- Yes
Effect	Does the individual believe that the Criminal Justice system functions fairly/effectively? 0- No 1- Yes